

## Korte mededelingen

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### The discovery of Javanese writing in a Sri Lankan Malay manuscript

Beyond the boundaries of what is typically considered the Indonesian-Malay world, a small community known today as the Sri Lanka Malays continued to employ the Malay language in writing and speech long after its ancestors left the Indonesian archipelago and Malay peninsula for their new home. Beginning in the late seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth, the Dutch Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company) used the island of Ceylon as a site to banish rebels and criminals. Native troops from the archipelago who served in the Dutch army were also sent there, as were others employed in a range of capacities. After their takeover of the island in 1796, the British too brought to Ceylon colonial subjects from the archipelago and the Malay Peninsula, primarily to serve in the military. From the early political exiles – many of whom were members of ruling families in Java, Sulawesi, Madura, and other islands – and the accompanying retainers, soldiers, servants, and workers developed the community of Sri Lankan Malays.<sup>1</sup>

Manuscripts and books preserved in private collections owned by Malay families in Sri Lanka testify to an impressive and ongoing engagement by previous generations with a range of texts written primarily in Malay and Arabic. The majority of these have an ‘Islamic character’ in that they include theological treatises, manuals on prayer and ritual, *hikayat* and *syair* on the battles of early Islam, heroic figures and adventures, and mystical tracts. A striking feature of many of these writings is their similarity to those found in manuscripts now housed in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Leiden. There are, however, also works that represent local agendas, depict events in colonial Ceylon, or are otherwise distinct from the broader eighteenth and nineteenth century Malay literature from elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The manuscripts are written in the

<sup>1</sup> For the two most comprehensive books to date on the Sri Lankan Malays’ history, see Hussainmiya 1987b, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> For an example of a poem depicting a local event, a squabble between Malay and Bengali soldiers serving in the British army, see Hussainmiya 1987a. For an analysis of a Sri Lankan text almost unknown in Malay elsewhere (but popular in Javanese), see Ricci forthcoming.

modified form of the Arabic script known commonly as jawi, but in Sri Lanka termed *gundul*. The latter term is used in Java for Javanese written in an unvoiced Arabic script and likely attests to an important Javanese presence in the early stages of the community's history.

Although the ancestors of the Malays came from a range of places and linguistic and ethnic backgrounds in the Indonesian archipelago and, to a lesser degree, the Malay Peninsula, the Malay language was the single most important language in which they wrote their literary and religious works. Although it is reasonable to assume that they spoke a variety of languages, at least initially, no traces of writing in another Indonesian language have ever been found. Below I present the first evidence of such writing, in Javanese, encountered in an early nineteenth century manuscript from Colombo.

### *A Malay Compendium from Sri Lanka*

The manuscript, measuring 21.2 x 16 cm, is a bound 270 page long compendium of texts of different lengths and authorship. The writing is clear, with some pages stained or torn. The manuscript is in the possession of Mr. B.D.K Saldin of Dehiwala, a suburb of Colombo.<sup>3</sup> Mr. Saldin (who was born in 1928) inherited it from his father Tuan Junaideen Saldin upon his death in 1955. He does not know how it came to be in his father's possession.<sup>4</sup>

The manuscript includes several dates and was written over the course of almost three decades and by several hands, a common practice in compendiums of its kind. The earliest date noted is 1803 while the latest is 1831. The *hijri* or Gregorian calendar, and sometimes both, are invoked in different instances.

The name of the owner (*yang punya ini surat*) appears several times in the manuscript as Enci Sulaiman ibn 'Abd al-Jalil or ibn 'Abdullah Jalil. Enci Sulaiman describes himself as hailing from Ujung Pandang in the land of Makassar. Makassar was also the homeland of Sheikh Yusuf, religious scholar, anti-Dutch leader and the most prominent person to be exiled to Ceylon by the Dutch.<sup>5</sup> Enci Sulaiman provides further, highly significant detail about his ancestry: he is descended from Mas Haji, 'Abd Allah of the Javanese kingdom of Mataram.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> I thank Mr. B.D.K Saldin for generously granting me access to the manuscript. I list it as Malay Compendium in the reference list.

<sup>4</sup> Mr. Saldin and his family trace their roots to Encik Pantasih, who came to Sri Lanka from Sumenep in the eastern part of Madura, Indonesia. For a family history, see B.D.K. Saldin, Portrait of a Sri Lankan Malay (Dehiwala: B.D.K Saldin, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Sheikh Yusuf was exiled in 1684 and remained in Sri Lanka for a decade, during which time he wrote extensively and gained a following. In 1694 he was exiled further to the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa where he passed away in 1699.

<sup>6</sup> Turunan daripada Mas haji 'Abd Allah Jāwi Matāram.

*Javanese writing in the Sri Lankan Malay Compendium*

The Compendium includes several instances of Javanese writing, all composed in the modified and vocalized Arabic script known in Java as *pégon*. Below I briefly discuss these instances.

*A Javanese poem*

This self-standing text is the manuscript's most striking example of Javanese writing, for its relative completeness but also its content and the associations it evokes. It is a poem titled *Kidung rumeksa ing wengi* (A song guarding in the night, see image 1) that, as the title implies, offers its reciter protection from all dangers and evil lurking in the darkness, including jinn, sheytans, fire, water, and thieves. It goes on to associate the parts of the human body with the prophets of Islam. The poem is traditionally attributed to Sunan Kalijaga, the fifteenth century leader of the Javanese *wali sanga*, the nine 'saints' said to have converted Java to Islam and therefor echoes powerfully with foundational events of the Javanese past.

The poem as it appears in the Sri Lankan manuscript differs slightly from the way it is conventionally written in Java. Several changes seem linked to a pronounced nasalization that occurs in spoken and written Sri Lankan Malay that must have also found its way into what we may term Sri Lankan Javanese. Thus *bilahing* for *bilahi* (disaster, bad luck), *luputing* for *luput* (miss, escape). The sound 'a' (similar to English 'o' in orange) is sometimes replaced with 'u': *adu* for *adoh* (far), *tirtu* for *tirta* (water). Some words are written incorrectly or are replaced altogether. This tendency suggests that the poem may have been copied and recopied by scribes who were not well acquainted with the language and could not identify and correct the errors. It may also be the case that the poem was written down from memory, with the scribe basing himself on aural memory rather than a written sample.

Parts of verse 3 as well as verses 4 and 5 appear in a Malay prose translation directly preceding the *Kidung*. These sections dwell on the connection between different limbs, organs, and attributes of the human body and particular prophets, a common trope in Javanese Islamic literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For example, Isa is associated with the breath, Abu Bakar with the flesh, and Idris with the hair. Despite the various forms translation takes within the manuscript (interlinear, section by section, paraphrasing), it is consistently practiced between Arabic and Malay only. This is the sole instance of Javanese-Malay translation and interestingly the Malay text precedes the Javanese one, as if anticipating its appearance.

Not only the question of vocabulary and content is worthy of note. The poem is written in *macapat*, the poetic meters in which much of Javanese lit-



erature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was composed and which were not employed in Malay writing. The various *macapat* meters are differentiated along three dimensions: the number of lines per verse, the number of syllables in each line and the nature of the final syllable in each line. The *Kidung* is written in *dhandhanggula*. Despite a few errors in the syllable count and the choice of final syllable (exchanging 'a' for 'u,' for example), the meter is clearly maintained along all three dimensions. The preservation of the poem's metrical properties suggests a possible familiarity with, or perhaps distant memory of Javanese prosody and literary conventions in nineteenth century Sri Lanka.

*A list of Javanese numbers*

An additional example of independent Javanese writing appears in the form of a list of the numbers from one to forty that fills two pages of the manuscript. Whereas the *Kidung* suggests a certain acquaintance with Javanese literary tradition the list of numbers signals a more mundane realm of knowledge in which the practical skill of counting and calculating in Javanese may have remained significant or at least worthy of mention. The list contains several mistakes that indicate confusion regarding the Javanese numerals or perhaps an attempt to rely on memory with mixed results. The Javanese word for twenty five, for example, constitutes an exception and differs from the rest of the numerals between twenty and thirty which follow a set pattern. Rather than listing the correct yet exceptional word, *selawé*, the scribe used *limalikur*, which fits the logic of the sequence but is not conventionally used. After reaching forty with the numerals listed in the low register of Javanese (*ngoko*), the scribe went back to thirty one (rather than forty one) and repeated the same numerals using a combination of low and high (*krama*) Javanese that is unconventional.<sup>7</sup> In this instance we find a hint of the complex system of Javanese speech registers that is at the heart of Javanese notions of power and societal hierarchies, albeit only a faint echo that does not constitute conclusive evidence for an in-depth understanding of that system.

*A Javanese translation of an Arabic hadith*

Another form Javanese writing takes in the Malay manuscript is that of a brief hadith in Arabic that is translated, line by line, into Javanese. Arabic

<sup>7</sup> Thus the first series of numerals is *telungpuluh siji*, *telungpuluh dua* [another error, should be *telungpuluh loro* but the Malay word *dua*, 'two,' is used rather than the Javanese *loro*], *telungpuluh telu*, etcetera. In the repeat series *tigangpuluh siji*, *tigangpuluh dua* [as above], *tigangpuluh telu* etcetera appears. Thirty in high Javanese should be *tigangdasa* rather than *tigangpuluh*; thirty one should be *tigangdasa setunggal*, etcetera.

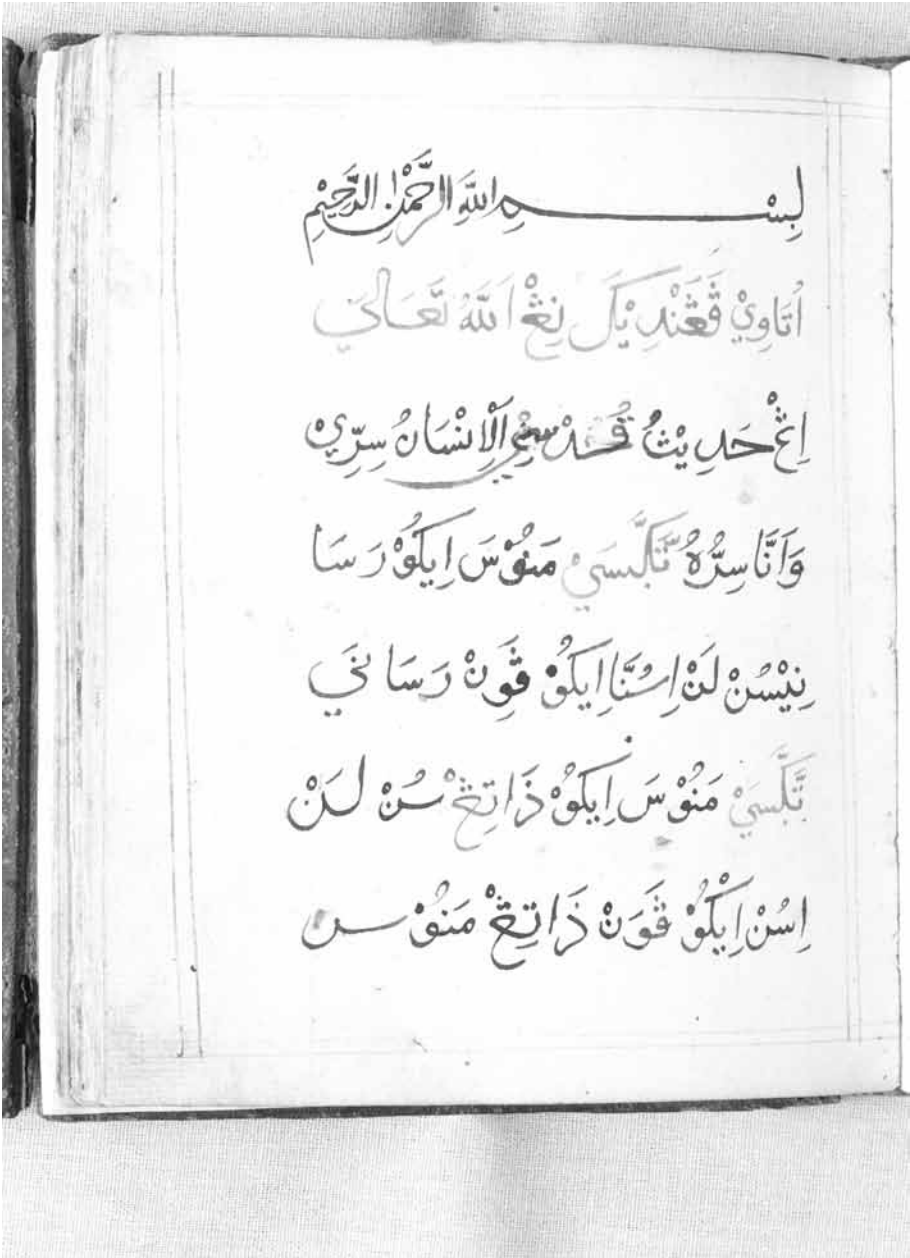


Image 2. An Arabic hadith and Javanese translation in the Malay Compendium.  
Courtesy B.D.K. Saldin.

and Javanese alternate on the page. The hadith is the famous *al insānu sirri wa annā sirruhu* (Man is my secret and I am his secret, see image 2) rendered in Javanese as *manusa iku rasa nisun lan isun iku pawin rasane*,<sup>8</sup> followed by a second rendering: *manusa iku dhāt ingsun lan isun iku pawan dhāt ing manusa*.

#### *Scattered Javanese words*

Finally, Javanese was also incorporated into the manuscript in the form of single words or expressions that appear throughout, used as part of local Malay vocabulary, perhaps interchangeable with corresponding words in that language. Examples include *tembung* (word), *sethithik* (a little, few), *tiyang* (person), *iki saking* (this is from), *aja lali* (do not forget). A diagram that features the points of the compass lists them in Javanese: *lor*, *wétan*, *kidul* and *kulon* (north, east, south, and west, respectively).

#### *Conclusions*

It is difficult to deduce the precise level of familiarity with Javanese on the basis of these brief examples derived from a single manuscript. Nonetheless, the inclusion of Javanese in this otherwise predominantly Malay and Arabic compendium is significant. The *Kidung* raises questions about the transmission of Javanese poetic genres and meters to Sri Lanka. Its content evokes popular Javanese notions of one's susceptibility to the host of unseen yet potent beings populating the environment and to the power of particular forms of language and recitation to offer protection and refuge. The list of body parts appearing in the latter part of the poem, the numbers' list and the words scattered throughout the text suggest, at the very least, a lasting residue of practical and important vocabulary. The translation of the hadith attests to the use of Javanese as a language of Islamic learning.

Beyond the brief sections of Javanese writing discussed the impression that the manuscript possesses a 'Javanese character' is strengthened by the owner's association with the Shattariya and the mention of his ancestor Haji 'Abd Allah of Mataram, who is described as a renowned sheikh.<sup>9</sup> Toward the end of a fifteen page long section in Malay attributed to Haji 'Abd Allah it is

<sup>8</sup> There is a possibility that the word *sir* in Arabic, usually translated as secret or hidden, was rendered here not as *rahsa* (Javanese secret) but as *rasa*, a word that is not easily translated and has a range of meanings including taste, meaning, sense, flavour, sensation, experience, inner feeling of the heart. The latter translation – inner feeling, inner self – may in fact correspond quite closely with the meaning of *sir* in sufi writings. Whether the translator had *rasa* or *rahsa* decisively in mind is difficult to determine because of spelling variations in the manuscripts.

<sup>9</sup> inilah risala daripada shaikh Kāmal mukamal yaitu daripada haji 'Abd Allah negari Matārām.

noted specifically that the text (here kitab) was transmitted from the realm of Mataram. A warning is added that this text should not be read to those disciples who have not yet engaged in 'ilm nafas and that the guidance of a guru is essential to a correct understanding of this "science of the breath".<sup>10</sup> Indeed, discussions of this form of knowledge are common in Javanese works yet not easily found within the Malay 'classics,' a fact that complements the claim that this circulating text derived from a Javanese source.<sup>11</sup> If we listen also to the silences and consider not just what is present but what is absent it is noteworthy that the volume contains no pantuns and syairs, popular Malay literary genres that are represented often in Malay writing in Sri Lanka. Thus the Compendium attests that beneath the cloak of Malay, the dominant and unifying language of the community, lie traces of the Sri Lankan Malays' more variegated cultural and linguistic past, awaiting further exploration.

<sup>10</sup> Kitab turun daripada nagari Matāram kepada anaq muridnya jangan engkau berikan membaca kepada orang yang belum mengaji 'ilm nafas ini.

<sup>11</sup> Discussions of the breath (Javanese *napas*) are found, for example, in the Javanese *Serat Samud* corpus. A search for 'ilm nafas (using a variety of spellings) on the Malay Concordance Project website which documents 170 Malay texts and documents, does not result in a single reference, see <http://mcp.anu.edu.au/Q/mcp.html>

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